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CHRISTIAN SECTS OF THE NEAR EAST

1. Greek Orthodox

The original church of the Holy Land still exists and is called the "Holy Orthodox Church", the "Church of the Seven Councils, Ecumenical, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic."

In the beginning the Christian movement existed chiefly among the Jewish colonies of the Roman Empire, but due to the preaching of Paul and his associates it soon became as popular among the Greeks as among the Jews. Although the peasants of the Empire spoke their colloquial dialects, the city people usually spoke Greek. The Orthodox Church developed as the church of these Greek speaking towns-people, with the great oriental capital of the Empire, Antioch as its center.

At first the dogma and ritual were very simple, but as the Church grew in strength and accepted many pagans into communion, a complicated doctrinal system developed and the ritual became dramatic and elaborate. When Constantine made Christianity the principal sect of the Empire and later on when Theodosius put an end to paganism in 390 A.D., crowds of people joined the Church and brought many of their own ideas into the institution.

During the centuries when political and personal ambitions were often mixed with metaphysical discussions, the Orthodox Church and the ruling Emperor were almost always on the same side. The conferences, which were especially important in determining the dogma of the Church, were those held by the Council of Nicaea, 325 A.D., the Council of Ephesus, 431 A.D., the Council of Chalcedon, 451 A.D., and the Third Council of Constantinople, 680 A.D.

The four original patriarchates of the Church still exist: Antioch, Jerusalem, Constantinople, and Alexandria. As new states became loyal to the Church it became the custom to form new national units rather than to try to centralize the ecclesiastical government. In time Greece, Cyprus, Russia and the different countries of the Balkans came to have branches of their own. These separate bodies are known as "autocephalous" churches and it is their duty to inform one another about the election of new patriarchs and to help each other to remain true to the historic tenets of their faith.

In Greece, Palestine and Cyprus the high ecclesiastics are Greeks, but in other places they are natives of the lands using the native tongue for many parts of the service.

In each country the Patriarch presides over the Holy Synod which is made up of a certain number of bishops and archbishops. In the smaller states the difference between a bishop and archbishop is not carefully marked. The Church of Russia used to be presided over by a Synod, but the Communist government has recently appointed a Patriarch.

Election of the Patriarch differs in various places. It is usually conducted by members of the Synod, by certain lay representatives and by officials of the government. As Antioch is no longer a city of importance the Patriarch of Antioch resides at Damascus where he controls the communities of Syria and Lebanon.

The Metropolitan archbishop at Rome was in many ways an even more influential ecclesiastic of the Church than his colleagues were able to be in the East, until the Church of Rome became entirely separate from the Orthodox Church during the 11th Century. Some of the principal points of difference between the Orthodox and the Roman churches are the following:-

The Orthodox Church holds that the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father alone, whereas the Roman Church believes in the procession from both the Father and the Son.

The Orthodox Church demands triple rather than single immersion for baptism. The Priest dips the baby into the water three times. It uses leavened bread for the mass, rather than the unleavened bread of the Roman Church.

The wine as well as the bread is given to the people of the Orthodox Church, while only the bread is distributed to the congregation in the Roman Church. In the Orthodox sect the bread is dipped in the wine and given to the worshipper on a spoon.

Indulgences and purgatory are not accepted by the Orthodox Church. In the Latin Church, unlike the Orthodox, only the bishop can administer confirmation.

Both churches believe in celibacy for monks and members of the higher clergy, but in the Orthodox Church the parish priests marry and bring up families.

The inner sanctuary of the Orthodox Church is separated from the nave by a screen and is used for certain ritualistic purposes. As a rule the ceremonies are longer than they are in the Roman Church.

Of course the greatest difference of all is the fact that the Orthodox Church has no connection with the Pope so that its interpretation of modern problems is different from that of the Church of Rome. On the whole the Orthodox branches in the Near East are apt to be less exclusive than the Church of Rome. For instance the branches of the Orthodox Church were represented at the ecumenical conferences of Amsterdam in 1948.

The Orthodox Church has used the Julian Calendar, thirteen days behind our Gregorian Calendar of the West. But recently numerous branches of the church has changed to our own calendar system. Feasts are numerous and enthusiastically observed, especially in the country districts.

The Orthodox Church allows pictures or icons but does not use statues and images as the Roman Church does. There are many detailed differences between the two churches in connection with the forms of the various services but space does not make it possible to describe them in a brief outline. In the wedding service, for instance, the bride and groom are crowned and march around three times in addition to performing other rites.

Although the Church of Rome and its uniate branches are very influential in certain parts of the Near East the majority of the Christians still belong to the Orthodox Church. When the Revolution took place in Russia the Orthodox Church as a whole suffered a great political and financial loss. At the close of the Second World War Russia tried to resume old contacts with branches of the Church in the Balkans and Near East.

2. Nestorians

Nestorius was born near the Taurus Mountains, educated at Antioch, and accepted as a monk, famous for asceticism and eloquence. In 428 A.D. he was appointed Patriarch of Constantinople. His aggressiveness so aroused the jealousy of Cyril of Alexandria that the Emperor called the Council of Ephesus to settle the dispute in 431 A.D.

Nestorius was accused, probably unfairly, of teaching that there were two person in Christ, instead of the one person officially recognized. When he was condemned his followers formed a separate church of their own. Persecution pushed the sect to the East where it became popular and influential in the interior of Asia. The Muhammadans usually treated the Church kindly so that, even as late as the 10th Century, there were Nestorian communities as far East as China.

The great sect was devastated by the Tartar wars of the 13th and 14th centuries. Many of the members transferred to other churches until there were only about 100,000 Nestorians left in 1913. At that time the Patriarch lived at Kochannes, a village on the Greater Zab River, in Kurdistan. Most of the members of the Church lived in the mountain regions between Turkey and Persia or on the edge of the steppe north of Mosul.

During World War I the Nestorians sided with the British and Russians. When Russia collapsed the Turks turned on the community and drove them from their homes in the mountains of Kurdistan. Many of them perished from exposure; others reached Iraq where they were cared for by the British in refugee camps. Large numbers of the men

enlisted in the 'Iraq army, while others were employed by the Iraq railroad company and air ports. Only the sheep herders north of Mosul were allowed to remain in their own villages.

The name "Assyrian" became attached to the Nestorians who survived the war. A special trustee board was established by the League of Nations to take care of them. England, 'Iraq and the League itself appropriated funds to help them. An effort was made to find some country which would accept the Assyrians as immigrants. The situation was complicated by the fact that Great Britain gave up her mandate over 'Iraq and demobilized many of the Assyrians who had been in the army permitting them to return to their homes with rifles and ammunition.

This irritated the 'Iraqis and was one reason why a group of Assyrians was massacred. Finally the French authorities agreed to allow the Assyrians to move to Syria. Some 15,000 sheep herders in the hills north of Mosul decided to remain at home. The seven or eight thousand Assyrians who were being supported by work on the railroad and at the air port also decided not to move. But 9,500 of the thirteen or fourteen thousand refugees who had settled on farm lands near Mosul were glad to escape to more friendly surroundings.

During the years 1937, 1938 and 1939 the League of Nations purchased lands which stretched for about thirty miles on both sides of the River Khabbur, which is a tributary of the Euphrates. This settlement is about half way between Ras al-'Ain and Hassette in the Jazirah province of Syria. Each family was given a domed roof house. The community was given a yoke of cattle for each fifteen members, a sheep for every individual, some forty-eight irrigation wheels, several mechanical pumping stations, watered gardens for vegetables and unlimited land on the steppe for such wheat growing and sheep breeding as could be carried on in a dry climate.

The people have been settled in thirty-one villages and given churches, small schools and a hospital. After a drought in 1937 and months of living on a dole, the community enjoyed unusually good harvests in 1938 and became self-supporting.

The Nestorians use the Aramaic of Jesus' time. Their priests marry. Their ritual and rites are somewhat similar to those of the Orthodox Church but more primitive. Even the members of the higher clergy are not properly educated so that the Church must go through a reorganization if it is again to become a world force. Their Patriarch is Mar Shamun, who has inherited his position from an ancestral family of patriarchs. Because of political difficulties, he has been obliged to live in America and has had little influence over his own people.

3. Syrians or Jacobites

Both at Alexandria and Antioch many theologians developed the Monophysite doctrine. This claimed that divinity and humanity make one compound nature in Christ.

The Council of Chalcedon, 451 A.D., condemned the doctrine so that the Monophysites formed a separate sect of their own. The Coptic Church grew up in Egypt and held to the doctrine without modification. The school of Antioch formed the Old Syrian or Jacobite Church which adopted the Eutychian interpretation of the doctrine that the divinity constitutes the sole nature of Christ.

During the Islamic period the caliphs employed many members of the Syrian Church who knew the Syriac language and were able to interpret old books of importance. As most of the members of the Church lived in the Near East, rather than in Central Asia, they did not suffer from the Tartar invasions as the Nestorians did.

From the time of the Crusades until the World War, the Patriarchs of the Church used the monastery of al-Za'feran near Mardin as their residence. At the time of the Armenian massacres, when most of the Christians were expelled from Turkey after the founding of the Turkish Republic, the Jacobites naturally had a difficult time. On the other hand as they had no political ties with European countries they did not suffer as much as the other Christian sects did.

The Patriarchate was moved to the city of Hums in Syria. Some of the members of the Church remained in Turkey though a considerable number moved South to 'Iraq and the Jazirah district of Syria. No accurate figures are available but a very rough estimate places about 20,000 members of the Church in the central and eastern regions of Syria, 30,000 in South-East Turkey, and smaller numbers in 'Iraq, Lebanon and other near by states.

During the 6th Century the Nestorians converted a large number of people on the Malabar Coast of India. When this group was cut off from the parent church by the Tartar wars most of them united with the Jacobite Church. The main transfer took place in 1665 when the Jacobite Metropolitan of Jerusalem visited India. Thus the Patriarch who now lives at Hums has nominal control over 300,000 people in South-West India.

The parish priests must be married, whereas the members of the higher clergy must be celibate. Syriac is the principal language of the rituals. The ecclesiastics wear gowns and heavy bowl shaped hats. The bishop carries a staff, topped with two serpents, instead of the usual mitre and ring. The priests shave their heads, in contrast to the Orthodox clergy, but both groups wear long beards.

The deacons, sub-deacons, singers and readers are all called by the same term which is probably a survival of early times when there were few artificial distinctions. In a general way the feasts, ceremonies and rituals of the Church are not very different from those of the Orthodox Church although there are many detailed differences. When a bishop is installed he is covered by a cloth during a long preliminary ceremony and then unveiled almost like a monument.

Outside of India the community is a poor one. The ecclesiastics lack proper education though the Patriarch himself is a highly cultured and well-educated man. He speaks English and has visited the United States. As the Orthodox Church was largely a community of Greek speaking persons from the towns, so the Syrian Church developed as a community of country people speaking the vernacular.

The Church renders a useful service to these simple people but it needs an intellectual revival if it is to keep its hold on families who are influenced by modern ideas. As the Church is very tolerant and the priests are not bigotted it is likely that the group will be able to adjust itself to the renaissance movement which is taking place at the present time.

4. The Copts

The word "Copt" comes from the Arabic pronunciation of the Greek name for the Egyptians. Christianity became popular in Egypt during the first three centuries of our era and the Patriarch of Alexandria was one of the four great prelates of the ancient oriental church. Alexandria itself was one of the two principal centers of dogmatic study and religious activity.

When the Patriarch Dioscorus was banished by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. the majority of the members in Egypt held fast to the Monophysite heresy. The Monophysite doctrine of the Copts teaches that Christ was one person with one nature made up by the indissoluble union of a divine and human nature. But still the two natures remained distinct, unconfounded and uncommingled; separate though inseparable.

They were favored by the first Muslim conquerors for political reasons so that they became the dominant party in what was left of Christian Egypt. In spite of severe persecutions under certain harsh rulers of the Middle Ages the Church continued to exist as a strong, independent sect. During the past one hundred years it has represented about 1/14 of the population of Egypt. There are now about 1,085,000 Copts in the country.

The gospels are still read in the ancient Bohairic dialect whereas parts of the ritual are rendered in Arabic. Many old rites are retained and the laymen as well as the priests receive both the wine and the bread at communion. Images and crucifixes are not used though pictures are popular. Modern scientific thought and the European influences in Egypt have done much to undermine the strength of the ancient Church.

In 330 A.D. Frumentius was appointed as the first Bishop of Ethiopia by Athanasius. Ever since that time the Metropolitans of Ethiopia have been appointed from Egypt and the Abyssinian Church has been an important off-shoot of the Coptic Sect.

5. The National Armenian Church

Tradition tells us that Gregory the Illuminator passed through many trials and experiences but lived to complete the conversion of the Armenian people and to be appointed as their bishop, about 300 A.D., just before the time of Constantine. When the Council of Chalcedon condemned the Monophysite doctrine the Armenian Church, which was Monophysite, broke away from the Orthodox group and became a national church and independent sect. It is often called the "Gregorian" Church.

The principal ecclesiastic of the Armenian Church is the Catholicos of Echmiadzin who resides in a monastery near Erivan, between the Caucasus and Mount Ararat. There is a second Catholicos of Sis, who was formerly in Cilicia in South-East Asia Minor. The Church has had a long and hard history, suffering from one attack after another.

Naturally the people of the Erivan district were intimately connected with Russia which was one of the principal reasons why the Turks attacked the Armenians during the World War. It is estimated that over a million Armenians of different sects either died or left Turkey between 1914 and 1924. Many of them found refuge in Bulgaria and Greece and 150,000 settled in parts of Syria and Lebanon.

The Armenian Catholicos of Sis followed his refugee flock to Lebanon and moved his residence from Cilicia to the small village of Antilyas across the bay from Beirut. The Near East Foundation made it possible for him to purchase a building, once used as an orphanage, at half price. About 60,000 Armenians, most of whom are members of the Gregorian Church, have settled near by. Thus a new center has been established in the Christian part of Lebanon under French protection. Some fine new church buildings and parochial schools have been erected and the community has emerged from the distinctly refugee conditions which existed after the World War. As the province of Hatay or Alexandretta has recently been given back to Turkey there are some recent refugees from the Musa Dagh and Antioch regions.

The Catholicos of Sis is also responsible for some 55,000 Armenians near Aleppo and perhaps as many as 40,000 others in the Latakiya and Jazirah regions of Syria. An effort has been made to start Sunday Schools, to train some young priests and to adapt the church to its new surroundings.

In the meantime the people of the Erivan district and the Catholicos of Echmiadzin have found themselves situated in one of the units of the U.S.S.R. No accurate figures are available but there are probably about three quarters of a million people left in the Soviet of Armenia. The Russian government has not interfered with them to the same extent that it has persecuted the Orthodox people of Russia though needless to say their situation is far from an easy one.

During the year 1947 over 50,000 Armenians returned to the Soviet of Armenia from Iran, Greece, Syria and Lebanon.

The Armenian Church uses the Armenian language. Most of its forms are different from those of the Orthodox Church but space is too limited to describe detailed peculiarities. In general the ritual is of an oriental type and springs from the same origins as those of the Orthodox Church. The Armenians have recently adopted the western calendar, but in order to avoid confusion at Jerusalem, they celebrate Christmas on January 6th throughout the Holy Land.

6. Evangelical Churches

In 1820 the American Board, which at that time combined the foreign work of both the Presbyterian and Congregational Churches, sent missionaries to the Near East. Since that time the missionary movement has rapidly expanded and European societies have worked side by side with American ones.

In general the Congregational Church is at work in Greece, Bulgaria, Turkey and among the Armenian refugees of Syria and Lebanon. The Presbyterian Church is working in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Northern Iran. The United Presbyterians carry on extensive work in Egypt and the Reformed Presbyterians have missions in Cyprus and the Latakia district. The Anglicans are working in Southern Persia, Palestine, Trans-Jordan, the Sudan and Egypt.

A joint group of Dutch Reformed and Presbyterian missionaries are working in Iraq and Arabia. There are several Quaker or Friends' enterprises in Palestine and Lebanon, the Danes have an active mission on the desert between Damascus and Palmyra, the Adventists, Church of God, Christian Alliance and other groups also have projects in different parts of the Near East. The Methodists have done some work in Bulgaria and the Y.M.C.A. and Y.W.C.A. carry on valuable work in a number of large cities.

Although the early missionaries did not intend to start separate sects of their own, persons dissatisfied with the old Oriental Churches demanded services for marriage, baptism and death. Thus the missionaries came to establish evangelical communities. There are now a considerable number of Protestant congregations in the Near East, especially in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Iran.

Few Muslims have joined these churches, except in Southern Iran, but many members of the Oriental Churches have left their old forms of worship in order to become Protestant. The Coptic, Gregorian and Orthodox Churches have contributed most of the members to the new Evangelical groups.

At the present time there is a splendid effort on the part of the missionaries to cooperate closely together. The native Christian congregations are responding to this same policy and trying to unify

their interests. Most of the younger missionaries are anxious to help the old historical churches to revive, by means of schools, medical missions, agricultural work and charities. Rather than to continue to urge the members of Oriental Churches to leave their own communities and to become Protestant, they wish to create a truer spirit of Christian fellowship between the Evangelical and Oriental Churches.

The Near East Foundation has helped the Gregorian Church to train its clergy and there are almost always a half dozen young monks of the Greek Orthodox Church being trained by International College at Beirut.

Time alone can tell whether the old churches will adopt enough reforms to render the Evangelical groups unnecessary, or whether the Protestant communities will become so virile that they will gradually attract the educated youth away from the old churches and become the enlightened congregations of the future. Most of the educated young men and women would like to see the historical churches themselves undergo a rebirth, but it is always hard to put new wine into old bottles, so that the Protestant element may be forced into a position of leadership.

7. The Roman Catholic and Uniate Churches

The Roman Catholic Church separated from the Orthodox Church of the Byzantine Empire in 1045 A.D. The principal reason for the division was political but there was also a dogmatic issue at stake. The Orthodox Church held that the procession of the Holy Ghost was from the Father alone, whereas the Roman Church insisted that the procession was from both the Father and the Son.

During the Crusades the Church of Rome came into close contact with the Oriental communities. In 1622 A.D. Pope Gregory XV encouraged the Propaganda of the Faith to win converts from the ancient churches of the East to Rome.

In the 19th Century the French government subsidized the Society of Jesus so that it could carry on religious and educational work in the Near East. This was at the time when the Jesuits were not allowed to work freely in France. The Freres Chretiens and numerous orders of nuns were also aided. An Apostolic Delegate of the Pope was sent to Syria and in 1847 A.D. the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem was established.

Latin churches have been erected at centers like Beirut and Jerusalem. Many schools, orphanages and hospitals have been established by the ecclesiastical orders and thousands of children have been brought up in an atmosphere of Roman Catholic culture. The Roman Catholic Church has been a great force for civilization and progress, especially in Lebanon, Egypt and Palestine.

These efforts have led to the splitting off from each one of the oriental churches of a group which has assumed the form of an autonomous body affiliated with Rome. These autonomous churches have retained the right to use their historic rituals and vernacular languages as well as to allow their parish priests to marry. They are governed by their own ecclesiastical authorities under the supervision of the Vatican. They are called the Uniate Churches.

The Uniate Churches in the Near East

(a) The Chaldaean Church

In 1552 A.D. a dispute about the succession of the patriarchate led a large number of members of the Nestorian Church to form a uniate body, presided over by their Patriarch of Babylon, who resided in 'Iraq. The Chaldaean Church still exists. Most of the members are in 'Iraq though there are communities in the Jazirah district of Syria and other places.

(b) The Greek Catholic Church

In 1724 A.D. the Roman Catholic propaganda in Syria caused a large group of members of the Orthodox Church to form a new sect. This was the Greek Catholic or Melchite Church, a uniate community affiliated with Rome. Most of the members are in Lebanon and Syria or else among the Syrian emigrant populations of Egypt and the Americas.

The Patriarch spends his winters in Egypt and his summers in Lebanon or Syria. The Metropolitan Bishop of Beirut presides over a large community and controls the College Patriarchal at Beirut.

(c) The Coptic Catholic Church

This uniate schism of the Coptic Church was formed in 1732 A.D. The Patriarch resides at Alexandria and most of the members are in Egypt where they number about 15,000.

(d) The Armenian Catholic Church

In 1328 A.D. a group of Armenians, known as the United Brethren, became affiliated with Rome and formed the basis for the organization of a uniate church. This community developed through the centuries that followed. Most of the members are refugees in Syria and Lebanon. The Patriarch has built a fine new residence and cathedral church on the hill above Beirut River. The clergy are well educated and able to collect such substantial sums of money that they are carrying on an active work among the refugee children in Lebanon. The present Patriarch is also a cardinal.

(e) The Syrian Catholic Church

In 1783 A.D. a wing of the Jacobite Church formed an autonomous sect allied with Rome. Originally the center was at Mardin but after the war many of the members moved to the Jazirah district of Syria,

east of the Euphrates, as well as to 'Iraq. The Patriarch established himself at Beirut where a fine new residence was built for him. In 1937 the Syrian Catholic Patriarch was made a Cardinal.

(f) The Maronite Church

During the 6th Century the Byzantine Empire was torn by a doctrinal controversy. The Orthodox Church held to the traditional tenet that there was one person in Christ, but two natures;- one human and one divine. The Monophysites claimed that there was only one nature which was divine.

At the beginning of the 7th Century the Byzantine Emperor, Heraclius, tried to make peace by finding a compromise doctrine which both parties could accept. He backed the Monothelite doctrine,- that Jesus has two natures in one person but only one will. The doctrine is more accurately expressed by saying that there is only "one divinely human mode of working and willing in Christ." This doctrine failed to make peace and was denounced as heresy by the Third Council of Constantinople in 680 A.D.

It was at this time that the Muslim invasion of Syria took place. In order to harass the Muhammadan troops the Byzantine authorities persuaded the fierce rebel or Mardaite bands of the Amanus Mountains to move south into the impregnable fastnesses of North Lebanon, where valleys several thousand feet deep lie between peaks eight and ten thousand feet high.

Many fugitives joined these Mardaite bands. Among them were the followers of a certain Saint Maron who led his group from the north to Lebanon. Although most of the Mardaite bands returned to Asia Minor when they found that they could not defeat the Muslims, the followers of Maron, or Maronites, built villages in the Jubbah district of Lebanon where they remain to this day.

Although they themselves do not ordinarily admit that their forefathers accepted the Monothelite heresy, scholars believe that this was the case. Some claim that the name "Maronite" comes from the name of an Abbot, Maron, or Marun. But as he probably died about 400 A.D. it is much more likely that the name comes from Yuhanna Marun, (John Maro), who was the first leader and Patriarch of the group and who died in 707 A.D.

During the period of the Crusades William of Tyre noted that the Maronites, "who had for almost five hundred years so followed the error of a certain arch-heretic named Maro," "joined themselves to the Patriarch of Antioch, Aimericus, who was the third Latin prelate to preside over this church." This alliance with the Roman Church took place about 1182 A.D. and was a natural thing to have happen, as the Maronites must have been glad to welcome the Crusaders to their land, after years of struggle with the Muhammadans.

From the time of the Crusades to the present day the Maronites have been the principal friends and diplomatic allies of the French in the Levant. When the province of Mount Lebanon was made autonomous after the massacres of 1860, French missionaries opened many schools in North Lebanon and the Maronites were free to settle in villages and cities throughout the country. Over 300,000 emigrated to North and South America and Egypt so that the community became rich from its foreign contacts. Many monasteries were built or rebuilt and the alliance with Rome made as close as seemed practical.

For centuries the Patriarchs lived in a small monastery, hidden among the cliffs at the bottom of the deep Qadishah Valley of North Lebanon. It is known as Quannubin. When the country became safe, the Patriarch built a summer residence at Diman, on the cliffs above Qannubin, and a large winter residence at E'Kirki, on the beautiful mountainside above the Bay of Junah, to the north of Beirut.

The Patriarch of Antioch and the Whole East is the head of the Church except for the fact that he is under the general supervision of Rome. He has charge of the many temporal and ecclesiastical affairs of his sect. During the French occupation he exercised great political influence. The President of the Lebanese Republic is customarily a Maronite.

The services of the Church are of an oriental type. Syriac and Arabic are used. It is not practicable to describe the rites in detail but it is interesting to note that when a priest dies he is carried in state to the tomb, enthroned on a chair. Members of the clergy wear the usual black robes and either black hoods or round, turban shaped hats.

There are about 240,000 Maronites in Lebanon in addition to the even greater number who have emigrated to other lands.

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